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ABSTRACT

A composition instructor became interested in the playfulness of electronic discourse and how it might reshape student composition. He noticed that playfulness sets many hypertexts off from their better-behaved print ancestors, suspecting that the playful elements of student hypertexts were more than mere "play," that they opened writers and readers to the text as dramatic, symbolic action. In students' hypertextual play, composers may play up and upon its difference from the stereotypical student academic essay as well as in simulation and parody of an array of other genres such as newspapers and guides. In creating a fluid, graphical, and textual space, students exhibit keen awareness that as composers they can create a dramatic space through a narrative frame or metaphor that may yield an experience of information for the audience. Authors can easily include alternative texts within a document, creating uncertainty in the framing of any particular segment. Authors must learn to accept the playful, slippery conditions of hypertext writing and use it to some effect. Playful movements, choices, and effects are the ways authors make a play for the reader's approval and sustained attention. (CR)

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The Play Element in Student Hypertext Composition and the Creation of Dramatic Experience

I'd like to start off with some short quotations that have spurred my thinking about play and hypertext: In discussing Barthes' readerly and writerly texts, Terrence Hawks writes-- "In readerly texts the signifiers march: in writerly texts they dance." Theorist of hypertext, Jay Bolter, asserts that "playfulness is the defining quality of this new medium" and that true hypertext is "a multiplicity without the imposition of a principle of domination." Techno-optimist, Richard Lanham, notes that "electronic text can oscillate between . . . the prosaic and poetic uses of language." Hypertexts, L. M. Dryden's writes, can be "remarkably complex and witty—the result of an integration of work and play at high levels of cognition." John Slatin and James Porter suggest that "hypertext is an attempt to ask and simultaneously to answer what is now the paramount question, not just for Composition Studies but for English Studies as a whole: 'What is writing?'" Fuse these notions and we have an ideal: a freely moving, multiple, writerly text that oscillates or dances between serious and playful and poetic and prosaic uses of language in a medium whose defining quality is playfulness, a medium, moreover, that may lead us to redefine the nature of writing. I find this theoretical weight somewhat leavened by the important role of play in this formulation.

As a composition instructor, I became interested in the playfulness of electronic discourse and how it might reshape student composition. I noticed that playfulness sets many hypertexts off from their better-behaved print ancestors. I suspected that the playful elements of student hypertexts were

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more than "mere play," as it is derogatorily called, that the best of this play opened writers and readers to the text as dramatic, symbolic action. In creating a fluid, graphical, and textual space, students exhibit a keen awareness that as composers they can create a dramatic space through a narrative frame or metaphor that may yield an experience of information for the audience. The very idea of creating a "site" for readers involves refiguring the usual roles for readers and authors. The document as site, as virtual space, demands presentation as performance, and casts readers and writers as actors in an unfolding drama, making manifest Burke's concept of language as symbolic action.

Bateson noted that play always involves a metacommunicative signal that play is occurring. In playful hypertexts, this signal becomes a significant part of the composition that coexists with and often compliments serious purposes. Dwight Conquergood, an anthropologist of performance, writes that "the metacommunicative signal "this is play" temporarily releases, but does not disconnect, us from workaday realities and responsibilities and opens up a privileged space for sheer deconstruction and reconstruction." I call the juxtaposition and blending of serious and ludic language moves "serio-ludic discourse," which, for me, is a significant key to opening composition up to the paradoxical power of play.

Brenda Laurel asks: "What if we were to define the act of information retrieval, not as *looking for* something, but *examining* or *experiencing* it?," a shift in emphasis from navigation to and from sites of information to "the action involved in *perceiving*, *interpreting*, and *experiencing* information" (140) Laurel's "what if" question can lead us to consider how composing a text for dramatic interaction comes into play in student hypertext composition. In most hypertexts, the experience of the narrative frame or

metaphor is fragmented rather than whole in the mimetic sense, meaning that reading hypertexts demands a different attention to the text as structure, signification, and experience than in the composition of print texts. Some hypertext occupies the middle of a continuum between the fictional, mimetic simulation of virtual reality and linear, logical print text, inviting readers into an experience that defeats their smooth "interpellation" in the text. Richard Lanham refers to this reframing of language as an oscillation between "looking through" words to meaning and "looking at" the screen as ornament, design, play, decorum, and reader experience. Creating experiences for the reader demands a different way of thinking about how texts can act upon readers, and the relationship between texts and the dramatic effects of visual and aural media. It is not just that different traditions and conventions hold sway in print genres; electronic media seem to call forth the need to establish contact with readers, to explicitly recognize their role in the experience of the document. What this suggests, perhaps provocatively, is that computers are moving texts closer to the condition of literature: composition as the creation of an experience of information for an implied reader who, as they say, "is game." As with "creative writing," hypertext authors can ask readers to approach their texts experimentally and playfully, to view them as arenas of symbolic actions.

A number of conditions help create a stage for playful hypertext composition. Despite the popularity of the Web, the relative novelty of hypertext frames it as an experimental medium, warranting and perhaps demanding experimentation in its composition. Hypertextual composition is often realized through a process of *bricolage*, described by Sherry Turkle as "arranging and rearranging a set of well-known materials" that are ready-to-hand. *Bricoleurs* approach problem-solving "by entering into a relationship

with their work materials that has more the flavor of a conversation than a monologue"; they "learn about how things work by interacting with them." *Bricolage*, in this sense, is composition as purposeful, associative play with familiar images and language. As one composes hypertext with and against the conventions of print text, compositional choices become more overtly visible as rhetorical intention and effect, as self-conscious style, posture, and dramatic action, and reader/writer decorum. Another way of saying this is that playful hypertexts are self-consciously performative language acts.

In students hypertextual play, composers may play up and upon its difference from the stereotypical student academic essay as well as in simulation and parody of an array of other genres such as newspapers and guides. Awareness of this difference becomes for students a license to break taboos and experiment with the performative abilities of the medium. That authors can easily include alternative texts within a document creates uncertainty in the framing of any particular segment. I call this condition the hypertext uncertainty principle. Authors must learn to accept the playful, slippery conditions of hypertext writing and use it to some effect. Composers of playful hypertext seems to feel compelled to create an electronic space through which the reader can journey, read, and experience an overt representation of knowledge. This compulsion may be propelled partly by the author's sense that the hypertext uncertainty principle creates a need for more dramatic, appealing, and meaningful transitions or links in the text's structure. Authors beckon, tempt, and reward readers with graphics, humor, inventive word-play, direct address, and provocative navigational transitions; they reach out to readers with humane reassurances, clever conundrums, and playful transitions, in effect establishing an explicit contract or partnership with readers, an *ethos*, accomplished between reader and

author through shared humor and an implied contract that "I will entertain you while you learn, reflect, consider and explore." Playful movements, choices, and effects are the ways authors make a play for the reader's approval and sustained attention. Students use jokes, self-deprecating humor, tricks, conundrums, puns, collage effects, sound files, surprising options, ironic juxtapositions, odd concepts, navigational metaphors, framing narratives, alternative texts, direct address, and semiotic *bricolage* to lure, tease, deceive, play off of "common sense" expectations, persuade, seduce, humor, and teach the reader how to read and enjoy the text. At times, serio-ludic discourse in the hypertexts conveys sophisticated metacommentary on the text and its action.

Let's consider some playful elements in student compositions. Authors often explicitly refer to exploration as the defining activity of reading hypertext by visually and verbally marking the entrance, door, or point of departure into the text: the text as a complex landscape or space the intrepid reader explores. A sustained exploration motif can be seen in a project on animation called "The Land of Animation":

> The land of animation is a vast, fertile one. Its creatures grows and always changes its looks. Each creature influence one another, and they give birth to very different looking children.[1]

The bridge in the opening card provides and appropriate visual link across the temporal landscape. Click on the Land of Tomorrow and you are welcomed to that imaginative space. The authors are not referring to a paper ("In this paper we will blah blah blah"); instead they describe a fantasized representation of what they have set out to portray. The extent of the

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[1] As in earlier chapters, student discourse is reproduced exactly as it is written with grammar and spelling errors intact.

metaphor is impressive. The description of the Land of Animation suggests that it is peopled by very different creatures who influence each other and breed new forms. This image is continued in figure two where "new creatures flow from this land to the land of today." Cross-breeding, temporal interanimation—the metaphor becomes quite a hodgepodge of pastoral, organic romanticism and sci-fi futurism— yet taken as a whole, it effectively suggests both intertextuality (creatures influencing and breeding with one another across time) and the fanciful metamorphosis of animation in the digital age.

The text of the introduction in figure two is whimsical, visionary, and ambiguous. It states:

> Welcome to the land of tomorrow. This land is lies very high up, and you can see it but you can't quite reach it. The clouds you see here can change to anything you wish for. New creatures flow from this land to the land of today, giving a new face to it constantly every day. Our tools today enable us to travel faster upwards, but the farther you look, the darker it gets, until all you see is stars.

The imagery of straining upwards to the unknown stars is cleverly supported in their use of an up arrow for moving to the next card: to enter the Land of Tomorrow, the reader clicks on the up arrow and the card scrolls up into the stack. This choice reinforces and demonstrates the written introduction's statement that "our tools today enable us to travel faster upwards " and that the Land of Tomorrow "lies very high up." These metaphors do suggest some authorial awareness of how hypertext creates opportunities for different reader and writer roles, that role-play and dramatism create a playful re-staging of the audience/performer relationship. They gesture toward the

attempt to create a visual means of experiencing the subject that can lead to more vividly realized understanding.

In another hypercard project from the same course, "The Next Step in Education," at the click of the mouse, a card dramatically zooms open to reveal a stylized, crude, and comical rendering of a television. Within a second or two, the TV blinks on, then off, a seductive wink, a tease, as if it beckons readers to turn it on: And turn it on, they must, or go no further, a fact the reader does not yet know. Nothing on the card indicates any buttons to click, yet the TV does have on/off and channel knobs, and a remote control unit sits up top. The reader must try one of these, and on/off is the logical place to start. Upon clicking this button, the TV "turns on" with a flash of light before opening to a map linking the reader to the sections of the project. In effect, since we are forced to turn on the TV to do some basic navigation, opening a card in the Introductory stack is the symbolic equivalent to turning on a TV. This provocative conflation of television and hypertext would no doubt please Neil Postman whose condemnation of technology in education is discussed in one section ironically understated in its title, "Neil Postman has his views!". The blinking TV in the hypertext, in effect, asks the reader to test for themselves the question of the educational potential of computers and television.

Once in the sections we leave the TV behind: it has made its point playfully and well, although our encounter with it contrasts meaningfully with a later experience. In one of these sections, "Are Computers the Answer?," the reader is presented with a famous painting of Adam and Eve. The only color in the image is the red apple Adam and Eve hold together. To its left the reader is addressed directly: "Pick the apple . . . If you dare!" If the TV teases the reader, the apple taunts. As with the TV, the reader is tempted

to pick the apple of knowledge, but is here given a choice. At bottom left is a pulsating hand pointing left above the command "Continue." The hand, through crude animation available in HyperCard, moves forward toward the reader and recedes in rapid order. The timid (or differently curious) reader will click on the hand and be transported to the *Paradise Lost* Book Six lesson. The hand pointing left might indicate going backward, as that direction implies going back a card. The daring (or differently manipulated) reader who picks the apple (that is clicks, or more accurately touches the apple along with Adam and Eve) gets a reward denied the less daring: an electric piano and organ start in with some chords, syncopated congas, bass and lead guitars join in one by one until a man and woman, the Austin band, Timbuk 3, sing the following lyrics in unison:

> God Made an Angel
> He liked what he saw
> He made another
> But with a tiny flaw
> That went unnoticed
> So He made some more
> Each one less perfect
> Than the one before

The music is quite jazzy and attractive, while the lyrics are obviously appropriate, leaving the reader wanting more than the one minute segment. It is interesting that the reader who identifies with Milton's Adam and Eve gets to enjoy the link between popular culture and literature. The more docile reader goes directly on to the rather dry sample lesson. This cat and mouse game does serve a thematic purpose. The connection with the theme of temptation and knowledge in *Paradise Lost* is evident, but the more significant connection is the theme of the temptations of technologies of learning dealt with in the project. These two parallel moves, the winking TV and Adam's sonic apple, help to demonstrate and comment upon that

seduction and its inevitability. While all readers must turn on the TV, would any reader not touch the apple? It is likely that many readers would return to try both and, indeed, the move depends on that contrast for full effect. This choice brings forward an interestingly paradoxical tension between the lure of movement as seen in the oscillating hand and the static appeal of the apple that introduces sound, transforming the section from hypertext to multimedia. The tension is between two visual representations of direction in HyperCard: the pointing hand is more typical, although its beckoning movement is not, while the apple-picking makes the reader complicit with the devilish disobedience of authority that makes *Paradise Lost* so attractive. It is notable that this playful entryway is the gate to a simulation of a literature lesson. The other sections of the hypertext are more straightforward; they are about a specific element of course readings. The play element here emerges the most strongly in the section that simulates a possible computer-based lesson.

We now move from stand-alone HyperCard projects to the now ubiquitous Web. "The News Bit, a New News Resource" is an electronic simulation of a newspaper that focuses on the Web's coverage of news. Simulating a newspaper front page template creates a nice irony since The News Bit's bombastic headlines and cartoonish graphics parody its identity even as it demonstrates that the Web has transcended the physical and political limitations of the newspaper. Their attempt at newspaper realism includes the comic tactic of referring to page numbers, "Vol. 1, No. 1," to the news staff, and beginning each article on the main page and resuming it on a later page, where the title bar is repeated. The teasers are played up for effect, the excessive repetitions of exclamation and question marks playfully mimicking shouting street corner vendors: "**Boooooom!!!!!** The Oklahoma

bombing coverage on the Net"; "**Zap, You're News!!!** How the Zapatistas Rebels became news??"; **Locked up???** How the Net coved [sic] the Jake Baker case??" "Zap you're news!!!" puns off of the name of the Chiapan guerrilla group, the Zapatistas, to comment on the effect of Internet "coverage" of the movement. A goofy cartoon graphic of a rolled-up newspaper with female face and shoes sits athwart the beginning of the first article by Kristen Hall of the "News Bit staff." (See figure 5.6.) Each "article" links to a number of Web news sources. The News Bit is a fully webbed site, of the Web and about the Web, that parodically mimics a print genre, while genuinely partaking of the print genres of student essays and newspapers. Its hybridity is a product of the tension and freedom released in conversation between the two.

I have not commented on the quality of these hypertexts in terms of the writing, arguments, and criteria by which student writing is typically judged. These qualities varied widely from reasonable to awful. In some cases, such as in "The Next Step in Education," much of the content was inadequate. As a group project, it seems that some members' contributed good work while others did not. Am I being seduced by the imaginative tricks they produced in their hypertextual transitions? Absolutely, because the success of that aspect of their project makes it a near-miss, but one that holds a far greater potential to teach and engage than would have been possible with mere text. It is important to recognize that as composers, our students do not have to choose between mere play and mere text, and that, as teachers, we need to nurture the serio-ludic elements in our students' work as a means by which the rich, symbolic action of hypertexts can be brought to our screens.